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ABSTRACT

Motivated by the California English/Language Arts Framework, California teachers are working toward the goal of using the integrated language arts as tools for learning in all content areas. The core of this new curriculum is to help students make sense out of a piece of literature by moving into, through, and beyond a text. For example, a lesson centering around the poem "The Lesson of the Moth" by Don Marquis could involve getting into the work by tapping prior knowledge (having students list times when they were willing to take a risk), moving through the work by reading the poem aloud and having students draw images of what they hear, and going beyond the work by writing something in response to the poem. These types of tasks can also be used to work through difficult texts in other subject areas. As children come to learn to interact with text through their own prior knowledge and through talking and writing, they also learn that print is supposed to make sense and that they, the readers, have a responsibility to interact with the text to construct meaning that is significant to them. (Four references are appended.) (MM)

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Integrating the Language Arts

Alternatives and Strategies

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CS 009 150

INTEGRATING THE LANGUAGE ARTS:ALTERNATIVES AND STRATEGIES

KATHARINE A. KANE

In the state of California, a not-so-quiet revolution is taking place in the language arts field. The new English/Language Arts Framework uses the international "forbidden" sign (O) to indicate that the old way of teaching reading and the other language arts is no longer acceptable. We have been accused of "throwing the baby out with the bathwater". Instead, we are asking teachers, administrators and textbook publishers to "keep the baby", but to change the bathwater often, and to add a few bubbles to the bath as well.

What is no longer acceptable?

1. We no longer want learning to occur in isolated bits and pieces, with students suspending belief and all hope for understanding. Instead, we want to start with real pieces of full, whole, and natural-to-the-setting language that makes sense from the very beginning. As children come to learn to interact with text through their own prior knowledge and through talking and writing, they also learn that print is supposed to make sense and that they, the readers, have a responsibility to interact with the text to construct meaning that is significant to them.

2. We no longer want the language arts of listening, speaking, reading, writing, thinking, spelling, handwriting, grammar, to be taught as if they had no relationship to each other. We no longer want teachers to say, "Put away your spelling books; it's time for reading". Or "Put away your reading books; it's time for writing". All the language arts relate to and depend on each other. In fact, if people are poor in one, it is likely that they are poor in the others; and, conversely, if they are skilled in one, it is likely that they are skilled in the others.

What do we want, instead?

1. We want students to know that the language and thinking arts are the most powerful and useful tools that exist for acquiring and applying knowledge.

2. We want them to know that each of the language arts works with and for the others; that one often learns to read by writing and talking; that writing is strengthened by talking and reading; and that talking is made more powerful by writing and reading.

3. We also want them to know that the language and thinking arts are linked to content. That is, we write, read, think and talk about things, people, events and ideas in a real world, and that communication makes real changes in that world.

How do we intend to do this?

To show how the language arts might blend to help students to make sense out of a piece of literature (the core of this new curriculum), let us look at a mini-lesson that illustrates how to move INTO, THROUGH and BEYOND a piece of text. Notice how ALL the language arts are used, woven into a mosaic, rather than practiced one at a time. In an integrated lesson, like this one, one cannot tell where "reading" ends and "writing" starts, or what time spelling or grammar period begins.

This lesson centers around a poem by Don Marquis, from the "archy and mehitabel" series, called "The Lesson of the Moth".

I. Getting INTO the work

a. First, we will tap prior knowledge on the upcoming topic. Write down three times in your life (just list them briefly) when you were willing to take a risk.

b. Now, jot down three times when you were cautious (perhaps overly so). Share your list with a partner or neighbor.

c. Ask a few people to be brave enough to share out loud with the whole class what they have written. (This is a good way to learn about the people in your group, especially if you are going to be doing many cooperative projects.)

d. From this activity alone, ask students to predict (guess) what this poem might be about. Accept all answers non-judgmentally.

II. Moving THROUGH the work

a. Read the poem aloud as you project it on an overhead, just so students can hear how it sounds. Pause at the end to allow people to absorb the poem and to have initial personal and silent reactions to it.

b. Ask two other people to read the poem aloud. (This will illustrate that no one reading is the "right" one. Each reader will interpret in a slightly different way, based on their own prior knowledge and personal response to it) During the first of these readings, ask the students to draw a picture of the things that spring to mind while listening. During the second reading, ask students to jot down the words, phrases, or lines that are the most meaningful and important to them.

c. Share the drawings and words with your partner or neighbor. Ask some students to share with the whole class. Point out that there is obviously more than one "right" answer when reading, thinking about and writing about poems. Ask students to discuss, debate or defend various responses. Why did you draw what you did? Why were particular words important to you? Give examples from your own lives, as well as the text, to support your statements.

d. Take some time to notice and discuss how much students must ALREADY know about punctuation in order to get through these readings. (This 53-line poem has NO punctuation). Notice also that figuring out the punctuation slows you down at first. Ask students if they would have preferred to see a fully punctuated version, first, for clarity? (This is a painless skills lesson on punctuation that illustrates why we have such conventions: as a courtesy to the reader.)

III. Going BEYOND the text

a. Discuss the poem from the poet's point of view. What are the issues that Marquis seems to be raising? (Risk taking? Better safe than sorry? Passion vs. complacency?) Which side is he on? Which side are you on?

b. Treat everything you have done so far as prewriting, and write something in response to this poem. Your piece can be a problem-solution one, in which you state the problem, and the possible solutions, defending your favorite solution against all arguments. It could be a prose story based on the poem; it could be a biographical sketch of someone you know who is like the moth, or like archy. You could write about an autobiographical incident of your own in which you tell about a risk you took, or a time you were cautious (see your earlier lists). You might reflect on the deeper meaning and significance of the message to the world at large. You might evaluate the poem, setting criteria and standards for your judgments; you could give a straightforward report on the information contained in the poem; or you might interpret the issues raised in the earlier class discussion. Students who learn to respond in all of these modes, eventually, will then be on their way to being excellent writers themselves.

c. Share drafts with your partner or a small group, who can offer suggestions for revision. Finally, edit and proofread your work and share it with your class, your school, your family or some other appropriate audience.

Point out to students how much reading, writing, thinking, speaking and listening they have done as they studied this poem. Encourage them to notice, identify and discuss how many ideas were acquired or changed through sharing with classmates, and how much more meaning the poem has now than on first reading.

Learning, and applying what we learn, is done through talking, writing, reading, listening and thinking about content, in this case a poem. We can use these same kinds of tasks to help us work through difficult text in history/social science; science; math; and fine arts. Using the integrated language arts as tools for learning, in all content areas, is the ultimate goal toward which California teachers are working, motivated by the new English/Language Arts Framework.

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ABSTRACT

This talk was given at the International Reading Association's 1988 annual conference, on May 4, 1988, at Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Ever since publication of A NATION AT RISK, educators have been concerned about the need for educational reform in the U.S. In 1987 the State of California published an English/Language Arts Framework mandating some of these reforms. This paper presents some practical examples of how the Framework is being implemented in classrooms in California. An integrated lesson based on a Don Marquis poem is outlined.

This talk was followed by one illustrating how to use literature as models for children's writing.

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